



Rocky Mountain Resource Advisory Council Meeting Minutes

9 a.m., Nov. 9, 2023

Members Present

Category 1

| In-Person | Virtual |
|-----------------|--------------|
| Preston Larimer | |
| | Chris Cooper |
| | Pete Stagner |
| | Curt Howell |

Category 2

| In-Person | Virtual |
|--------------|-----------------|
| Irene Shonle | John Sztukowski |
| | Mick Daniel |
| | Loretta Mitson |

Category 3

| In-Person | Virtual |
|-----------|------------------|
| | Kent Wood |
| | Lawrence Pacheco |
| | Arthur Koepsell |
| | Ray Douglas |

BLM Employees Present

| In-Person | Virtual |
|---------------|-------------|
| Cathy Cook | |
| Levi Spellman | |
| Keith Berger | |
| Kalem Lenard | |
| | Dale Culver |

Public Present

| In-Person | Virtual |
|------------------|----------------|
| Cathy Garcia | |
| Justin Kurth | |

Welcome, Introductions, and Housekeeping

Members of the RAC, members of the public, and BLM employees introduced themselves.

Cathy Cook, the Designated Federal Officer, went over the agenda and called roll.

District Updates

Cook, DM for Rocky Mountain District, discussed possible opportunities for the RAC to participate in various planning efforts, including the Gunnison Sage Grouse RMPA/EIS and the Big Game RMPA/EIS. Both are published in the *Federal Register* and are posted on eplanning for a 90-day public review and comment period. Cook will provide Garcia with the links to view the documents.

HQ is sticking to the original planning timeline for the solar PEIS and plans to have the final draft out this summer for public comment. The internal draft is running behind. The internal 30 day review for the Solar PEIS will launch Nov. 13, which covers the renewable solar energy program across public lands administration in an 11 state area of the west.

In news from the district, the State Director will be swearing in our new SLV Field Manager on Dec. 6, and we will send out invites to our members so they can join in our celebration and welcome Culver to his new position.

Larimer: Is there a minimum number of times the RAC needs to meet per year?

Cook: No. But we tend to meet twice a year.

Agenda Item 1: Chair of the RAC

Cook explained the role of the chair and the demands of the position.

Kurth asked for an explanation of the Rac's purpose.

Cook explained the purpose of the RAC as a mechanism for record keeping, transparency, and public participation.

Mitson nominated Mick Daniel as Chair. Shonle seconds. Pacheco agrees.

Votes for: 11

Votes against: 0

Abstentions: 1 (Daniel)

Motion carries. Daniel accepts and is elected chair.

Agenda Item 2: Campground Business Plan

Royal Gorge Field Office Assistant Field Manager for Recreation, Kalem Lenard, explained the reason a business plan was needed for managing multiple camp sites, detailed the way fees are assessed, and explained which sites would be subject to the business plan.

Cook: Is this just Sand Gulch and Shelf Road?

Lenard: No. Turtle Rock will likely also fall under this. We discussed with Chaffee County and have made plans for other areas, like we did with Penrose Commons.

Cook: How much is the fee now?

Lenard: \$7.

Cook: When you initially looked at this, how much were you asking?

Lenard: When we looked at this and all the costs that go into managing these sites, we landed at about \$20 per night for individual sites. That gets us to a little bit better than break-even.

Cook: We looked at this during the last meeting. Where did we land on that?

Lenard: The feedback we got was that the fee we were seeking was too low. But also that it may be an issue for lower-income recreators. So, there had to be a mechanism for dealing with that. We took a look at what other field offices did, and they had it pegged to a consumer price index. So, we made the update to model the plan after that, and then just rounded up to the nearest dollar.

Mitson: It's not clear to me if the charge is per vehicle, person, or camp site.

Lenard: Per site.

Cook: That's cheaper than other state-managed sites in Colorado.

Lenard: Other places, like Fruita, have gone to \$20.

Shonle: I've seen that as the same price at other comparable sites around here in Cañon City.

Lenard: It's comparable.

Shonle: Can the cost be pegged to specific improvements and how much development and maintenance there are at a specific site?

Lenard: We looked at a lot of things and it turns out a lot of people really do prefer the undeveloped, primitive sites. People don't want to be stacked on top of each other. They want that dispersed feeling.

Larimer: Turtle Rock has so much dispersed camping. Some people have moved in there. There's a problem with these really affordable sites with people living there. With these increases, we will likely push those people out, they'll move elsewhere, and we'll then have to clean up those places too.

Lenard: We've seen that in the past. It's almost the nature of the beast. We're spending about \$30k to provide free services at Turtle Rock. We just can't afford to do that. So, we're looking at how to address this in the business plan. We're looking at the benefits and the costs with eyes wide open. We think getting rid of that 30k deficit will help us patrol and maintain any displacement that may take place.

Mitson: How do our costs compare to SLV GO site fees?

Daniel: Penitente is \$11 per night per site. \$20 for a group site.

Larimer: How is BLM funded at these local sites? Is it from Washington?

Lenard: Any funds collected at these sites go into a field office account that can only be used within that specific field office.

Larimer: I agree at looking at this more than every 11 years. Seeing a large jump can be distasteful for the public. Were there other fee structures discussed? Is there a middle ground? Just curious about whether \$15 would work instead of \$20.

Lenard: We started at \$15. The Pikes Peak Climber Alliance said it wasn't enough. They saw a funding need in the sites they were using and didn't want a deficit. If that's a recommendation from the RAC, we're open to taking a look.

Berger: At the last meeting, we discussed taking a look at fees more often. And, if you look at Colorado, our recreation fees are on the far low end of the spectrum when compared to other fees on public lands in other places.

Cook: Colorado is second in total recreation visits on BLM lands (behind California). But we're not second in funding:

Berger: We're dead last.

Cook: Based on your presentation last time, we're running in the red on every site, right? Would this make us break even? Put us in the black?

Lenard: A little in the black

Douglas: I'm a trustee in the town of Fairplay. It's budget season. We discussed raising fees at a camp site called the Beach. We were looking at going from \$5 to \$20. You can't afford to run at a loss. What image does the BLM want to be known for? Ragged locations, or safe and clean sites? Hopefully some of these fee increases can help increase staff and law enforcement presence. What does the BLM want to put out there?

Lenard: I appreciate that. Nationally, during COVID, people saw the BLM as, "this is where you go to live. This is where you go to dump stuff." We removed 33 tons of dumped garbage this year.

Douglas: That \$20 is similar to what the Forest Service charges as well.

Wood: My perspective is from Chaffee County where there's a lot of overuse, spurred on by low-income individuals and seasonal employees. I'm sympathetic. But I don't think public lands are supposed to be the answer. I see the increase of staffing and fees as a good thing. If you go from a few dollars to \$20 range, will it be collected by credit card or cash? It could become a target for those who need money. I think there needs to be a lot of attention to collection and enforcement. Cathy said it may not be possible for the RGFO to get a larger share. The RAC could possibly recommend additional money for enforcement in some of these more built-up areas. It's great that Chaffee County is helping out with funding. But that could change with local politics. Here one year and gone the next. I don't think that's a sustainable piece.

Berger: Kalem will talk about fee tubes in a minute. Folks at the state-wide RAC in March saw Doug Vilsack had the same thought. He challenged each field office to look for solutions. It would be something worth discussing.

Lenard: We have moved beyond putting cash in tubes on public lands. We've had a series of thefts here and at state parks and municipal areas. Fortunately, the BLM has evolved electronic fee collecting techniques. There's the rec.gov website. There's an app for scan and pay. We piloted a credit card machine at Guffey Gorge. There were a few small hiccups with paper slips. But it worked really well.

Shonle: Is there cell reception at all those sites?

Lenard: There is not always cell reception at these sites. But there are solutions there. , like with the scan and pay. You get a temporary confirmation number and a receipt. Then, when you're back in cell range, it processes at that time on the back end. Your temporary number is your proof of purchase. The credit card machines actually spit out a little ticket. While we have seen some challenges with those who prefer a first-come-first-served approach, we're not going back to cash.

Berger: It also costs us to have someone count that money.

Howell: The BLM can't protect the resource or serve the public without adequate funds. There isn't enough being funded through DC. So, the public needs to come up with the means, pay to play. I'm hoping our congressional staff has a message to bring back to their offices. Recreation isn't decreasing. I'm just hoping it doesn't always fall on the public to pay the fees needed to break even on costs to manage these sites. I'm hoping we can also look at changing management plans to accommodate current realities.

Lenard: We have been sourcing comments from the public and have been working on new ways to manage these areas. We tackled some of that with the Penrose Commons RAMP. The need was massive. We just don't have the staffing and capacity to manage out there. We're seeing resource shortages in Chaffee County too.

Larimer: I was going to ask about rec.gov. The BLM doesn't seem to be using it as much as other agencies. Kent said he sees funding from Chaffee County. I'm all for charging for sites like Turtle Rock. At Shavano, it's out of hand. The state, along the river, has done a really good job at spreading out and designating sites.

Berger: I'd encourage you to go out to some of these sites and see what these sites are dealing with. I grew up being able to do pretty much whatever you want on public lands. But after COVID, things are different. That higher use needs more management.

Lenard: That's why our camping plan for Chaffee is about transitioning to designated sites. We've been working on that. Our partners in the area have been asking us to move to designated sites. We worked on these trail systems but never really thought about camping. We established this trail system and people showed up. Now we're trying to catch up with the camping after people showed up.

Berger: Curt mentioned Fruita is \$20 for their sites. Dale said Great Sand Dunes National Park is \$20.

Mitson: Is there a time limit on camping to discourage homeless residence on public lands?

Berger: We should discuss that outside this meeting. Residing is different than camping.

Wood: I hear a large amount of support for the plan. We should just vote. But is there a way to amend the plan?

Daniel: Is there a motion to vote?

Wood: Motioned.

Larimer: Seconded.

Daniel: If there's no discussion, let's call for a vote.

Vote results:

Larimer - yes

Shonle - yes

Mitson - yes

Stagner - yes

Wood - yes

Howell - yes

Sztukowski - yes

Daniel - yes

Cooper – yes

Motion passes. RM RAC recommends increasing fees at developed recreation sites according to consumer price indexing.

Wood: If we wanted to consider writing a letter from the RAC to encourage more allocation for these sites, can we do it and what limitations are there?

Cook: I would say probably just write the letter as part of the resolution. The chair can pen the resolution and send it around to the other members.

Lenard: Thank you for the support as we face the challenge of increasing recreation. Process-wise, I think we can raise fees where they already exist. For new fees, there needs to be a federal register notice, and we can't implement new fees until 180 days after that's published. We're still trying to push that though. So, keep that timing in mind as we may end up charging fees in the middle of the busy season.

Wood: A different subject left over from the June meeting. There was a consensus about putting a letter together to support more range techs in the SLV. Now that we have our RAC chair, we can push it forward. Some of our members weren't there for the tour. The content issue is that not everyone was there and need to be brought up to speed. The procedural issue has been answered.

Daniel: Procedurally, if we work on draft statements, does it need to be part of the public record?

Spellman: Yes.

Stagner: Part of the problem with getting techs on the ground is getting people to apply. We're trying to help the BLM get qualified people to apply.

Berger: That's a good point. We always struggle with outreach. Our new state director is focusing on that. They hired a recruiter and that's getting going.

Mitson: At the next meeting date and place, can Ben Dunne be invited to speak on grazing laws and changing pressure on grazing land at the next meeting?

Larimer: It seems like we haven't had a quorum for so long, will we be alternating between field offices between meetings? I think we should also meet more than twice a year and get as many people in the room as possible.

Berger: Historically, we've tried to make these meetings combined with a field trip.

There was discussion about setting up a schedule for our FY24 meetings. We will likely hold 4 meetings this year. Some topics were suggested for the next RAC agenda including: working with the transient populations that have taken up residence on public lands, trash dumping, inviting the Costilla County Administrator Ben Doon to present, and an update on the proposal to create a National Monument in the Valley and how grazing rights and other pre-existing rights should be handled.

Shonle: At the next meeting, can we address some of the homeless individuals residing on public lands? I'm not sure how much of that 33 tons is from that. In these areas with repeat offenses, I think it would be good to have someone around to let people know. Maybe even signs to let people know they can't camp or dump there.

Berger: We've talked with our statewide leadership team about this. Some offices have it better or worse than others. RGFO probably has it worse than anywhere else in the state. We're the front range and a mild climate. The way we look at it is what we would call residing is different than camping. Camping is in a tent and they take their trash away with them. Residing is when people and their trash both stay. I'd say 80-90 percent of my officer's workload is dealing with those residing sites. Those sites tend to be a public health hazard. Trash, drugs, hazardous materials. We end up having to hire contractors to deal with those since our folks can't handle those types of hazardous materials. Our officers don't look at it like camping. It doesn't matter how long they've been there or if they've gone 30 miles. If you're residing there, you're in the wrong. Our officers spend a lot of time referring them to other health and human services. They've gotten pretty good at it. I wouldn't say it's a complete answer. There's a lot of that

population that doesn't want to use those resources. We've seen a lot of impact - from trash and dumping to needle cast. There's a lot of concern from the public on it as well as our officers. Huge camps. Huge dogs. People uncomfortable or scared. What can the RAC do? I know the BLM can't solve it on its own. We have partners who will likely be part of the solution. But the RAC is made up of community leaders. I'm sure the RAC can help.

Daniel: Pete, Loretta, Dale, and I were down in Manassa in November. We have a non-profit that's hosting conversations about the BLM land along the river. We have a public meeting on Dec. 7 in San Luis. We spoke last week. We're in a good place with it. They're trying to get public feedback on it. I think it went well. Good questions and comments.

Stagner: I thought it was a good meeting. Willing to listen and take consensus. There are some things the permittees have got to get into their heads - what happened and how it works as a whole. Multi use planning.

Daniel: If our RAC members are interested in attending, I can get you information on that.

Culver: There's an announcement out for a range technician position.

Pacheco: Sorry, all. I have to leave early.

Wood: Do we have a rough estimate for the number of people who are living on BLM lands?

Berger: That's tough to know. We've worked with Fremont County on those counts. That information might be available.

Lenard: Fremont County does have a running number of how many homeless individuals may be living in the county.

Public Participation and Public Comment Period

At 11:05 a.m. Cook asked if there were any questions from the public or those present.

Kurth: I just came to listen and learn. I appreciate being invited.

Garcia: We're glad to be here. Thanks for the invitation. I hear budgeting is a concern. But what area does the RAC cover?

Cook: Everything east of the continental divide.

Berger: Everything on the front range.

Cook: Thank you for attending.

Garcia: I'd like that link for the big game RMPA.

Closing Remarks

Cathy Cook delivered closing remarks and adjourned the meeting at 11:12 am. The recording was stopped and online members were dismissed. Those present in the room were dismissed.

Presentation Materials

- Campground business plan slides

RAC Recommendations

- Raise recreation fees at developed sites to \$20 and peg future fees to the consumer price index.